positioning an electrode in contact with, or close proximity to, an outer surface of an annulus of a disc within the patient's spine; and

applying a high frequency voltage to the electrode, the voltage being sufficient to at least partially close an opening in the annulus.

33. (New) The method of claim 32 further comprising applying sufficient high frequency voltage to the electrode to shrink collagen fibers within the annulus.

34. (New) The method of claim 32 further comprising applying sufficient high frequency voltage to the electrode to seal the opening in the annulus.

35. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the electrode is introduced through a percutaneous penetration in the patient.

36. (New) The method of claim 32 further comprising delivering electrically conductive fluid between the electrode and the annulus.

37. (New) The method of claim 36 further comprising positioning a return electrode within the electrically conductive fluid to complete a current flow path between the electrode and the return electrode.

38. (New) The method of claim 32 further comprising positioning a return electrode on the outer surface of the patient's body, and conducting electrical current from the electrode, through the patient's body, to the return electrode.

39. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the electrode comprises a single, active electrode at the distal end of a shaft.

40. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the electrode comprises a plurality of electrically isolated electrode terminals at the distal end of a shaft.

41. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the opening is on an inner surface of the annulus, the method comprising positioning the electrode on the outer surface of the annulus adjacent to the opening.

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42. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the opening is on the outer surface of the annulus, the method comprising positioning the electrode adjacent to, or in contact with, the opening.

43. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the electrode is introduced anteriorly.

44. (New) The method of claim 32 further comprising an instrument shaft and a return electrode, wherein the electrode and the return electrode are located on the instrument shaft, wherein the applying voltage step is carried out by applying a high frequency voltage difference between the electrode and the second electrode.

45. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the applying voltage step is carried out by applying about 45 to 60 volts rms to the electrode.

46. (New) The method of claim 32 wherein the applying voltage step is carried out at a voltage level and a time period sufficient to heat at least a portion of the annulus to a temperature of about 55 to 70° Celsius.

47. (New) A method for treating tissue within a patient's spine comprising:

positioning an electrode in close proximity to, or in contact with, an outer surface of an annulus of a disc; and